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Historical Society

—OF—

Southern California

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, 1900

THE STORES OF LOS ANGELES IN 1850

BY LAURA EVERTSEN KING.

(Read before the Pioneers, December, 1900.)

If a person walking down Broadway or Spring street, at the present day, could turn "Time backward in his flight" fifty years, how strange the contrast would seem. Where now stand blocks of stately buildings, whose windows are aglow with all the beauties of modern art, instead there would be two or three streets whose business centered in a few "tiendas," or stores, decorated with strings of "chilis" or jerked beef. The one window of each "tienda" was barred with iron, the "tiendero" sitting in the doorway to protect his wares, or to watch for customers. Where red and yellow brick buildings hold their heads proudly to the heavens now, fifty years ago the soft hills slid down to the back doors of the adobe dwelling and offered their wealth of flowers and wild herbs to the botanist. Sidewalks were unknown, pedestrians marched single file in the middle of the street, in winter to enjoy the sunshine, in summer to escape the trickling tears of "brea" which, dropping from the roofs, branded their linen or clogged their footsteps. Now where the policeman "wends his weary way," the "vaquero," with his lively "cuidado" (lookout) lassoed his wild steer, and dragging him to the "mantanza" at the rear of his dwelling, offered him on the altar of hospitality.

Among the most prominent stores in the '50's were those of

Labat Bros., Foster & McDougal, afterward Foster & Wadhams, of B. D. Wilson, Abel Stearns, S. Lazard's City of Paris, O. W. Childs, Chas. Ducommon, J. G. Downey, Schumacher, Goller, Lew Bow & Jayzinsky, etc. With the exception of O. W. Childs, Chas. Ducommon, J. G. Downey, John Goller and Jayzinsky, all carried general merchandise, which meant anything from a plow to a box of sardines, or from a needle to an anchor. Some merchants sold sugar and silks, others brogans and barrels of flour. Goller's was a wagon and carriage shop. O. W. Childs first sign read "tins to mend." Jayzinsky's stock consisted principally of clocks, but as the people of Southern California cared little for time, and only recorded it like the Indians by the sun, he soon failed. Afterwards he engaged in the hardware business with N. A. Potter. Jokes were often played upon the storekeepers, to while away the time. Thus one Christmas night, when the spirit of fun ran high, and no policeman was on the scene, some young men, who felt themselves "sold" along with the articles purchased, effaced the first syllable of Wadhams' name and substituted "old" in its place, making it Oldhams, and thus avenging themselves. It was almost impossible to procure anything eatable from abroad that was not not strong and lively enough to remove itself from one's presence before cooking. It was not the fault of the vender, but of the distance and difficulty in transportation. Mr. Ducommon and Mr. Downey arrived in Los Angeles together. Mr. Ducommon was a watchmaker, and Mr. Downey, a druggist. Each had a small stock in trade, which they packed in a "carreta" for transportation from San Pedro to Los Angeles. On the journey the cart broke down, and packing the most valuable of their possessions into carpet-sacks, they walked the remaining distance. Mr. Ducommon soon branched out in business, and his store became known as the most reliable one in his line, keeping the best goods, although at enormous prices. Neither Mr. Downey nor any other druggist could have failed to make money in the early '50's, when common Epsom salts retailed at the rate of five dollars per pound, and everything else was in proportion. One deliberated long before sending for a doctor in those days—fortunately, the climate was such that his services were not often needed. Perhaps the most interesting window display in the city in the early '50's was that of Don Abel Stearns', wherein common candy jars filled with gold, from the finest dust to "chispas," or nuggets, could be seen from the street adorning the shelves. As gold and silver coin were scarce, the natives working the placer mines in the adjoining mountains made

their purchases with gold dust. Tied in a red silk handkerchief, tucked into the waist-band of their trousers, would be their week's earnings; this, poured carelessly into the scales and as carelessly weighed, soon filled the jars. What dust remained was shaken out of its folds, and the handkerchief returned to its place. (No wonder that the native became the victim of sharpers and money-lenders; taking no thought of the morrow, he lived on, letting his inheritance slip from his grasp.)

The pioneer second hand store of Los Angeles was kept by a man named Yarrow, or old "Cuarto Ojos" (four eyes), as the natives called him, because of the large spectacles he wore, and the habit he had of looking over them, giving him the appearance of having "four eyes." Probably, however, this sobriquet attached to him because his glasses had four lenses, two in front, and one on each side. His store was on the corner of Requena and Los Angeles streets, in the rear of where the United States Hotel now stands. The store-room was a long, low adobe building with the usual store front of that day—a door and a narrow window. This left the back part of the long store almost in utter darkness, which probably gave rise to the uncanny tradition that certain portions of reputed wealth but strangers to the town had been enticed into this dark interior to their undoing, and that like the fly in the spider's den they "ne'er come out again." This idle tale was all owing to his spectacles—for in the early 50s all men who wore glasses were under suspicion—the general opinion prevailing was that they were worn to conceal one's motives and designs, which when hidden by the masque of spectacles, were suspected to be murderers. In the "tienda" of "Cuarto Ojos" were heaped together all sorts and conditions of things, very much as they are now in second hand stores, but the articles differed widely in kind and quality from those found in such stores today. Old "Cuarto Ojos" combined pawn broking and money lending with his other business. In close contact with the highly-colored shawls, rebosos, gold necklaces, silver mounted frenos and heavily embroidered muchillas, hung treacherous looking machetes, silver-mounted revolvers and all the trappings and paraphrenalia of the robber and the gambler out of luck, and forced there to stand and deliver as collateral for loans from old "Cuarto Ojos."

Coming up Requena street and crossing Main to the southwest corner of Main and Court streets, one arrived at the pioneer auction house of 1850. Here George F. Lamson persuaded the visitors to his store into buying wares that at the present day would find

their way to the rubbish heaps of the city. This story is told of his sale of a decrepit bureau: "Ladies and gentlemen,"—ladies minus, and gentlemen scarce—said the genial auctioneer, "here is the finest piece of mahogany ever brought across the plains or around the Horn—four deep drawers and keys to all of them; don't lose this bargain; it is one in a thousand!" It was knocked down to a personal friend of the auctioneer for the modest sum of \$24.00. After the sale the purchaser ventured to ask for the keys. "Why," said Lamson, "when I put up that article I never expected you would be fool enough to buy it. There are no keys, and more than that, there is no need of keys, for there are no locks to it."

On Los Angeles street in the same location where it stands to-day and kept by the same proprietor, Sam C. Foy, stood and still stands the pioneer saddlery of Los Angeles. Of the pioneer merchants of the '50's, Mr. Harris Newmark was the founder of a house still in existence. If any youth of Los Angeles would see for himself how honesty and strict attention to business commands success, let him visit the establishment of Mr. Newmark and his successors.

In the early '50's some merchants were accused of getting their hands into their neighbors' pockets, or rather of charging exorbitant prices to the depletion of the contents of their neighbors' purses. These same merchants never refused to go down into their own pockets for sweet charity's sake. If a collection was to be taken up for some charitable object, all that was necessary was to make the round of the stores, and money was poured into the hat without question of what was to be done with it. Now we have the Associated Charities and all sorts of charitable institutions, but for liberal and unquestioning giving, we take off our hats to the "stores of 1850."